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SUBJECT: BAVARIA'S CSU - PALACE POLITICS PLAY ON

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REF: Munich 28

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) It now appears all but certain that Interior Minister Beckstein will succeed Edmund Stoiber as Minister-President. Further, it appears that federal Agriculture Minister Seehofer's personal problems and negative campaign style have given Bavarian Economic Minister Huber a decisive, if not insurmountable, edge in the race for the Chairmanship of the CSU. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the CSU at this point is a dearth of ideas. The CSU of late appears to be more a soap opera than a platform for relevant debate, particularly on issues of national importance. End summary.

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE MINISTER-PRESIDENT

¶2. (SBU) On July 17, Edmund Stoiber is expected to give his final government declaration as Bavarian Minister-President. Two days later, the CSU Landtag (state assembly) caucus will, barring some unforeseen circumstance, officially nominate Interior Minister Guenther Beckstein (63) as its Minister-President candidate. During a special Landtag session on October 9, Beckstein is all but certain to be elected Minister President. He would present his new cabinet on October 16. Despite the appearance of a fait-accompli for Beckstein, he is taking nothing for granted. He has come close to sitting in the Minister-President's chair twice before - once when Stoiber ran for Federal Chancellor in 2002 and lost to Gerhard Schroeder, and again in fall of 2005 when Stoiber returned unexpectedly to Bavaria after rejecting a cabinet position in Berlin. Interior Ministry sources tell us that they have been instructed to be extremely vigilant so as to avoid creating any negative publicity for Beckstein between now and October 9.

THE PARTY CHAIRMAN

¶3. (SBU) In addition to handing over the reins of the State Chancellery to Beckstein, Stoiber will also give-up his other role as CSU Party Chairman. Unlike the Minister-President position, there are two men competing for the mantle of CSU party chief - Bavarian Economic Minister Erwin Huber (61), and Federal Agriculture Minister Horst Seehofer (58). At this stage, the smart money is on Huber. He enjoys the support of Beckstein and the party leadership. Additionally, the Landtag caucus and the CSU's youth organization, the "Junge Union," clearly favor Huber over Seehofer. Further, Huber's district of Lower Bavaria just reelected him CSU District Chairman with a 98 percent majority.

14. (U) Seehofer's base is not as clear, and appears to be diminishing. Until recently, polls showed he enjoyed the support of a majority of the CSU rank and file - but no longer. Both Stoiber and CSU Bundestag Caucus Chairman Peter Ramsauer have hinted at support for Seehofer, but nothing definitive as an endorsement. In addition to lacking Huber's notable endorsements and poll numbers, Seehofer faces questions over the conduct of his personal life and some well-publicized campaign gaffes. Most notably, Seehofer (with a wife and three kids in Ingolstadt) has kept a mistress in Berlin who recently gave birth to his child. Not surprisingly, this saga has not played well within the socially-conservative and largely Catholic CSU. In an apparent attempt to divert attention from his private life, Seehofer then allegedly threatened to reveal secrets about the private lives of other CSU leaders. He has also overtly implied that Huber was too provincial in his outlook for the job - moves which cost him support in the party.

COUNTING DOWN TO SEPTEMBER

15. (U) The new party chairman will be elected at the CSU party convention September 29. The winner will then pick a new party Secretary General. The CSU will also adopt its new party platform

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at the convention. Before then, all seven CSU districts will have held their bi-annual conventions over the summer. The most significant is Upper Bavaria (southern Bavaria, including greater Munich), which held its convention on June 30. At the gathering, retiring Landtag President Alois Glueck turned over the reins after 15 years as District Chairman to Bavarian Education Minister Siegfried Schneider, who defeated Bavarian Science Minister and ex-CSU Secretary General Thomas Goppel. This outcome is viewed by many within the CSU as a rejection of Goppel's strong personal ambitions in favor of Schneider's avoidance of the spotlight and focus on the good of the party - reinforcing the notion that CSUers

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put a premium on party loyalty and discipline.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Beckstein will not represent a generational change nor a sea change in terms of policy (REFTEL) - he will be a transitional figure. Huber may have a relatively provincial outlook as Seehofer implied - but no more so than would be expected for a CSU leader - "Freistaat Bayern" will always come first for Germany's only one-state party. However, Huber will likely prove a more reliable partner for Merkel's grand coalition than Stoiber. He had been Merkel's first choice to head the Federal Chancellery following the 2005 elections - a post he turned-down, given the possibility he would succeed Stoiber as Minister-President had Stoiber remained in Berlin.

17. (SBU) Perhaps more than anything else, the recent history of the CSU has been an example of the triumph of personality over ideas. One would be hard pressed to identify which issues of substance -- particularly of national consequence -- differentiate the candidates. This situation may simply be indicative of an entrenched party with a long-time absolute majority and no real competition to create a battle of ideas (according to a recent FORSA poll - in state elections, the CSU could count on 56 percent of the vote to the SPD's 16 percent). Ironically, what might best stimulate a more dynamic CSU would be political competition breathing down its neck - something not on the foreseeable Bavarian horizon.

18. (U) This report has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

19. (U) Previous reporting from Munich is available on our SIPRNET website at www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/munich/ .

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